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ABSTRACT

This address was presented to a conference celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of The United Way's "Success By 6" early childhood development initiative. The address acknowledges that the American public education system has traditionally operated on the assumption that children enter kindergarten at approximately the same educational level and similarly prepared to learn, but that due to efforts such as Success By 6, the educational system is changing. The address encourages the early childhood education community to meet the challenges ahead, including the persistent achievement gaps along racial and socioeconomic lines, rising rates of childhood poverty, and difficulties in obtaining funding for children's initiatives. The outcomes of early education are summarized, and the benefits of investing in public education for society are emphasized. The address also announces the final ten million dollar grant as part of the Bank of America 5-year fifty million dollar commitment to Success By 6, to be distributed among 106 United Way affiliates nationwide. Some of the accomplishments of the previous four years' investment are described, including the attraction of investments in early childhood from other public and private groups. The address concludes with a call to action to find and inspire new partners in supporting healthy early childhood development. (KB)

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Kenneth D. Lewis, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Bank of America
Remarks to the United Way of America Success by 6 Conference
"The Very First Smile"
Charlotte, North Carolina
May 22, 2003

... introduction given by Brian Gallagher, chief executive officer of United Way of America ...

Thanks, Brian. It's great to be here this afternoon.

I appreciate your kind words, and the warm welcome we've had from everyone here at the conference. Most of all, though, I'd like to thank everyone here for the work you do every day on behalf of America's children.

This event celebrates the 15th anniversary of The United Way's Success By 6 early childhood development initiative – but the people gathered here in Charlotte this week represent the broad foundation of the children's movement in our nation. In addition to those from The United Way, there are children, parents, volunteers, professionals and leaders here from Corporate Voices for Children, I Am Your Child, The Children's Defense Fund, Smart Start and many, many others. Every one of you is doing critical work for the future of our country, and you all have my gratitude.

One of my teammates at the bank asked me recently why I believe early childhood education is so important. A lot of thoughts and facts came to mind – many of which

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we'll talk about today – but one image, or memory, summed it up the best. I recalled that when my daughter was a young child – pre-school age – we read to her so much and so often that one of the very first phrases she ever learned to say was "earnings-per-share."

I figured as long as I was reading financial statements, I might as well read them to her.

Of course, I'm joking. The phrase she learned so early in life, and that opened the world up to her, was: "Read to me." And when I remember those early years with both my children, I also think about all the advantages they had that so many children in America do not have: a safe, secure home and neighborhood; world-class preventative healthcare; a house full of books and educational toys of all kinds; outside activities ranging from great pre-schools, to music and art classes, summer camps and gymnastics; and two parents at home who could spend the time and energy to pass on a tradition of educational achievement and love of learning.

Our public education system has operated from the beginning on the assumption that children arrive in kindergarten at age five more-or-less at the same educational level and similarly prepared to learn. Our system traditionally has not acknowledged the tremendous advantage that some children have over others simply as a result of the environment their parents were able to provide in those crucial first five years.

Thanks to people like all of you, our system is changing.

In recent years, there has been a sea-change in the way educators, researchers and parents have come to view the importance of early childhood. The organizations and investments represented here are a testament to our shared commitment to the development of our young children.

That we have come to our feet and begun walking in the right direction is encouraging. That we still have mountains to climb is also painfully clear. Even as we put our collective shoulder to the wheel – even as the wheel begins to turn – we see stubborn achievement gaps persist across racial and socio-economic lines. We see our efforts turned back by rising rates of extreme childhood poverty. And we see continuing economic headwinds making it harder every day to maintain funding for all our important children's initiatives.

These are our challenges. Meeting them head on is what I'd like to talk about today.

* * *

There's an old story Hugh McColl – our first champion of early childhood education – used to tell when he talked about early childhood education. The original source of the story was a man named Richard Whately, the archbishop of Dublin in the mid-19th century. It goes like this:

A woman goes to her clergyman seeking advice about the education of her child. The child is four years old and she wants to know when the clergyman thinks she should begin the child's education. "Madam," was the reply, "you have lost three years already. From the very first smile that gleams over an infant's cheek, your opportunity begins."

The available evidence supports this view.

According to an Early Head Start Report from June of last year, children completing quality early childhood development programs achieve gains on standardized tests of cognitive and language development, require fewer special learning interventions later on, and perform better on social-emotional tasks, such as relating to their parents, paying attention and behaving properly.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study from the University of Wisconsin showed that family support services and parental involvement in the classroom increase high school graduation rates by almost 30%; decrease children held back a grade by 40%; decrease participation in special education classes by 40%; and reduce juvenile arrests by more than 30%.

A report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services showed that children who master social and emotional milestones during infancy, toddler and preschool years are more likely to make a successful transition to school.

Finally, in our own early childhood initiative here in Mecklenburg County, Bright Beginnings, the results have been clear. Measured by end-of-year tests after kindergarten, first, second and third grade, the percent of students at or above grade level in literacy and mathematics who participated in Bright Beginnings averaged about 10 points above rates for eligible children who did not participate.

These results account for children who were not actually in third grade at the end of the study because they had been held back…but they do not account for children who left the system. It's worth noting, though, that children who were eligible for Bright Beginnings but did not participate left the Mecklenburg system at a rate of almost 45%… while attrition for the students in Bright Beginnings was around 26%…an indication that among its other benefits the program also promotes stability in children's lives.

We are not alone in our suspicion that, as someone once said, "a child is the only known substance from which a responsible adult can be made." Our nation has supported the idea of equal opportunity public education from the beginning.

Benjamin Rush, a proponent of free public education during the first years of our nation's history, wrote that "freedom can exist only in the society of knowledge. Without learning, men are incapable of knowing their rights; and where learning is confined to a few people, liberty can be neither equal nor universal."

Rush added that investments in public education more than pay for themselves over the long run, and do so more efficiently than almost any other public investment. Universal education, Rush said, would increase the profits of agriculture and promote manufacturing as knowledge expanded… enlighten us in the great business of finance and the efficient uses of money… education would teach us how to govern more effectively, and alert us to costly political mistakes of the past, so we might avoid repeating them.

In regard to the worst possible outcome of early educational failure – that is, compounding failures in school that lead to unproductive lives and criminal behavior in adulthood – Rush wrote that effective public schools would save us money by enabling us to sleep with fewer bolts and locks on our doors. Or, as Horace Mann, a British diplomat in the 18th century put it: "Jails and state prisons are the complement of schools; so many less as you have of the latter, so many more you must have of the former."

Encouraging the best outcomes in life for our children, and saving them from the worst … making education and opportunity both equal and universal, as Benjamin Rush urged us to do … is what early childhood initiatives like Success By 6 are all about. They extend to all our citizens, including our most disadvantaged, equal opportunities for good health, quality education and the intellectual development that is required to lead a productive life as a responsible member of a free society.

* * *

Bank of America has been making good on this challenge. In fact, today we are announcing the final $10 million grant as part of our five-year, $50 million commitment to Success By 6. This year's grants will be distributed among 106 United Way affiliates nationwide.

When we made that $50 million pledge, we knew we would attract a lot of attention. After all, this was the biggest single grant in our history and one of the biggest corporate grants in our nation's history. But we could not have foreseen the myriad ways our investment would be put to work for America's children. I could stand up here all day and only scratch the surface – but none of us want that. I'll give just a few examples.

In California, more than 2 million children are eligible for affordable insurance plans but are uninsured. Success By 6 has targeted outreach at more than 3,000 small businesses throughout the state to enroll employees on-site for the Children's Health Insurance Plan.

In Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, the Broward Community College and Success By 6 instituted a new fast-track program for caregivers. A reduced number of semester hours, more scholarships and increased wages have attracted students to pursue a Child Development Associates Degree. Increasing staff qualifications has raised the quality of childcare throughout the county.

And in Kansas City, Missouri, Success By 6 has helped almost 100 childcare centers and homes achieve accreditation from the National Association of the Education of Young Children. Their goal is 200 nationally accredited childcare centers and 100 homes by 2005.

Bank of America gave grants to 112 United Way affiliates across the country as part of our Success By 6 commitment last year, and we've worked with more than 200 since we first made our commitment in 1999. And our contributions have not been limited to financial grants. In almost every local Success By 6 initiative where we've given money, Bank of America associates have also volunteered as board members, policy advocates, fund-raisers and program designers.

The positive effects of these efforts can not be overstated given the state of our economy and the deteriorating situation of many of our neediest children.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, even as the number of poor children in our country has declined, the number of children in extreme poverty – with after-tax income (including food and housing benefits) falling below half the poverty line – has been growing steadily and in the latest study (2001) reached almost one million.

Studies have shown again and again a direct link between children in poverty and low rates of healthy development and scholastic achievement. Through Success By 6 and other initiatives aimed at disadvantaged young children, Bank of America and its partners

– all of you – are attacking the problems of our poorest kids head on. And, based on studies showing rising test scores, improved health and stronger parental involvement for children who participate in these initiatives, we are achieving results.

* * *

We are here this week to celebrate the success of our partnerships, and the progress our youngest children are making in their lives. Our success has been hard-earned, and we deserve this time together to reflect on our achievement.

Even so, we can not lose sight of the fragility of the progress we've made. Just as these initiatives have been built … and just as so many young lives have begun to turn around … the movement for early childhood development still could lose momentum. This is especially true in difficult economic times, when both public and private sources of funds are under immense pressure.

For example, at the state level, legislatures across the country are being forced to make tough choices to balance their budgets. And at the federal level, Congress is debating this summer whether to adopt major changes in the structure of Head Start that would improve accountability and efficiency in the system, but also could affect the way Head Start funds are allocated, potentially putting some aspects of the program at risk.

When we made our $50 million commitment to Success By 6, we did so in the expectation that these funds and our involvement would attract the attention – and the financial resources – of public and private groups in all the communities where we do business. We were right – in 2001 our $10 million generated a total commitment to Success By 6 of more than $62 million, and in 2002 that number grew to more than $100 million. Our leadership has brought new players into the game from the public and private sectors.

At the same time, while public opinion strongly supports early childhood initiatives at all levels, our slow-growth economy is making fund-raising harder and harder for all non-profit organizations. In this environment, in the years to come, the success of all our initiatives that support early childhood development – whether at the local, state or federal levels – will rely more than ever on broad-based support in our communities.

Our children will continue to rely on all of us and the partners we work with today…but they also will need the active participation of many others in our communities who must join the cause over time.

We know we will count on one another to help keep this dream alive. It also is up to every one of us to broaden our base… to widen the circle of our active partners… to make sure that every person and organization in our communities understands the importance of early childhood development…understands their stake in creating and

supporting effective solutions… and is moved to take action to create a better future for our children and for all of us.

Finding and inspiring these new partners is our collective call to action.

* * *

As the United States of America was being founded, Benjamin Rush knew that the future of public education in America would largely determine the political future of America as a free, democratic country. Thomas Jefferson agreed with Rush, saying: "Above all things, I hope the education of the people will be attended to. [I am] convinced that on this good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of [our] liberty."

The ideal of public education on which our republic is founded is itself founded on the presumption of equal and universal opportunity, resulting in equal and universal liberty. Opportunities in our society can in no way be equal when our children are arriving at the schoolhouse door with such widely varying degrees of ability and preparation.

Through Success By 6 and all the other early childhood development initiatives represented here today, Bank of America and our partners are working and investing to make the American dream of equal opportunity a reality for all America's children.

To those who had the foresight to start us down this path, I thank you for your vision and your courage. To those who are working shoulder to shoulder with us today, I thank you for your commitment and your optimism. And to all those in America who look forward to a strong and prosperous future for our children and our country, I urge you to join us.

Every day in this great country, thousands of new children are born into our family of freedom. And as the very first smile gleams over each infant's cheek, our opportunity begins.

Thank you for asking me to speak here today. It's been an honor.

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